
How to Make Partnerships Work: Suggestions From the Field

Collaborative initiatives within the criminal justice system have received increasing attention during the last few years, particularly those involving probation, parole, and other law enforcement agencies. Some of these initiatives have included other social service organizations, such as public mental health programs, school districts, and organizations that serve victims of crime.

Inspired to become more efficient and effective in the supervision of sex offenders, the Harris County Community Supervision and Corrections Department embarked on a new approach to managing this difficult population in May 1997, with the establishment of a centralized sex offender unit in downtown Houston. The unit includes 28 officers who supervise approximately 1,400 adult sex offenders for 37 criminal courts.

Overwhelmed by the increasing number of “unfunded mandates” coming from legislative sessions, probation departments and law enforcement agencies across Texas faced new and highly visible responsibilities related to sex offenders. These responsibilities included registration, public notification, treatment, enforcement of child safety zones, use of DNA databases, and other activities designed to “contain” the behavior of sex offenders on the community level. The question we asked ourselves was, what were we doing with the resources we already had and how could we use them more efficiently?

The high visibility of sex offending behavior and its consequences shifted the focus of our community toward a need for increased accountability on the part of probation departments, law enforcement agencies, and other groups that had contact with or responsibility for sex offenders on the local level. This pressure for accountability offered a perfect opportunity to be proactive, so we established an Interagency Coordinating Council on Sex Offenders. The council is composed of 35 to 40 representatives of agencies and organizations in Harris County, Texas, that interface with sex offenders in some capacity. These agencies are involved in treatment, sex offender registration, abuse investigations, polygraph tests, criminal defense, compensation to victims, public education, law enforcement, prosecution, jail operation, and probation and parole supervision. The group meets monthly to identify priorities, establish subcommittees, write grants, organize public speaking, cross-train, meet with elected officials, interact with the media, respond to victims’ concerns, make recommendations for future legislation, and include more stakeholders in the process.

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A cooperative partnership between probation, parole, the sheriff's department, and the police department resulted in the implementation of a sex offender field tracking system. The system requires a probation or parole officer to fax an information sheet to the patrol division of a local law enforcement agency, asking them to conduct a random drive-by visit to a sex offender's residence to check for compliance with specific conditions of supervision. The law enforcement agency then reports the results of the visit to the probation or parole agency. Another cooperative agreement involves the Harris County Commissioner's Court, which loans vehicles to probation officers to use in conducting "all hours surveillance" on sex offenders under community supervision.

Things to Do

We have learned some valuable lessons from the challenges we faced in building collaboration over the past 4 years. Based on our experience, we offer some suggestions to the field for establishing successful partnerships.

Profile: Interagency Coordinating Council on Sex Offenders, Harris County (Houston) Texas

Partner agencies:

All area justice and treatment agencies that have interaction with sex offenders.

Purpose:

This group was formed to improve coordination, resource utilization, and public understanding of sex offender supervision and management.

Launched: May 1997

Define the purpose—Define your vision, mission, and goals. These must be defined clearly enough to sell the concept to key officials who have decision-making authority. What is the problem or mandate that prompted this initiative? What were the desired outcomes? If you are promoting the idea of establishing a council, it is helpful to: 1) use supporting data and statistics to make your points and identify the benefits to your community; 2) provide testimony from experts in the field; and 3) tell a local story with examples of local situations to bring the seriousness of the problem to life without placing blame on anyone. It is important to remember that many of the people you will be approaching are elected officials. Present information in a way that shows how everyone will benefit.

Identify stakeholders—Which key officials of agencies in your community or state have any interaction with the offender population in question? Invite representatives from every sector to participate from the very beginning, because this is a time to create new working relationships and expand existing partnerships. In your letter of invitation, explain the need to have a representative who has direct access to the chief or director of the agency.

Prepare and organize information—After you have identified stakeholders, you should draft a letter of invitation, prepare the meeting agenda and materials, and prepare a press packet. It is a good idea to have the invitation come from the director of your agency. It should explain the initiative and why it is important and should include the names of other organizations invited to participate. If possible, you should also invite the press to the first meeting in order to make your group's efforts more visible to the community.

Schedule and facilitate meetings—The group’s first meeting might focus on introductions, a brief overview of each agency and its role, the goals of the council, and general agreement on a regular meeting date and time. It is also helpful to ask those present, “Is there anyone else you think we need to invite to participate who is not on the invitation list?” The second meeting can focus on re-introductions, if there are new participants, and identification of present barriers in the system, as viewed from all perspectives. In other words, ask the question “What are the issues and concerns that are foremost in your mind related to the management of this population?” Consider developing a form to gather this information between meetings. For maximum results, choose someone you know who has successful experience facilitating groups of people to lead this part of the meeting. Document the comments for future planning. Mail or fax meeting minutes to council members in a timely manner.

Identify priorities—What are the issues your group wants to tackle first? We were faced with having to coordinate the efforts of approximately 21 different law enforcement agencies that were mandated by the legislature to register sex offenders in the City of Houston and Harris County, Texas. All were performing this task differently. There were tremendous breakdowns in communications that we quickly recognized would compromise community safety. Making contact with and establishing relationships with these agencies became one of our top priorities. Once your priorities are identified, establish subcommittees to work on these concerns and to propose solutions. Make sure that each subcommittee has a volunteer chairperson and enough participants to do the work. Provide technical support when it is needed.

Publicize—Share the council’s work with community newspapers and radio stations, and participate in television interviews and public speaking engagements. Such activities show that you all are working proactively and collectively to prevent future victimization in your community. Make sure that whoever speaks on behalf of the council has the authority and knowledge to do so. Inform the agencies represented on the council of any media contact related to council activities, prior to the contact being made, if possible. Council members should always be informed or consulted before their actions as a group are represented or discussed publicly.

Seek multiple sources of funding and resources—We established a “grant collaboration team,” which became a subcommittee of the larger Council membership. This team was responsible for identifying local, state, and federal grant funds to support the goals and objectives of the council. In one instance, the team also designed and implemented a grant-funded program in the Sex Offender Unit. Approximately 30 professionals and college students volunteered to assist the grant collaboration team in this project by screening applications, teaching classes, writing curriculum, facilitating support groups, and collecting data. Funds for the project were received from the Violence Against Women Office of the U.S. Department of Justice. We also encouraged council members to get on the mailing

lists of a wide range of local, state, and federal organizations to stay informed on available resources and how our community might benefit from them.

Take advantage of training and technical assistance opportunities—In 1994, two key staff in the department completed a 1-week training course on the supervision and treatment of sex offenders sponsored by NIC. The key staff returned and trained 200 officers on the material over the next 2 years. NIC became an invaluable source to link us with “best practices” around the country. The Center for Sex Offender Management sponsored local training for our judiciary, which stimulated their interest in learning more about sex offender management and Council activities.

Get involved in the legislative process—Council members have met as a group with legislators to discuss concerns and recommend new laws on sex offender issues. Prior to those meetings, council members took the time to get to know the legislative staff and build rapport. It is best to brief your council members in advance on the ideas they will present on behalf of the membership. Some local council initiatives, such as implementation of a sex offender tracking system, have resulted in bills being drafted to mandate similar collaborative approaches involving law enforcement and community supervision and corrections departments across the state.

Maintain the momentum—Our experience showed us several ways to keep the momentum going: 1) Recognize members of the council and their agencies for their contributions. 2) Keep the membership informed of upcoming media events so they have adequate notice to participate. 3) Bring in speakers to address members on the latest trends in supervising offenders. 4) Celebrate accomplishments. 5) Publish articles in local newspapers or journals. 6) Create a subcommittee to apply for grant funding to support the goals of the council and assist in future planning. 7) Establish a speaker’s bureau from the council membership, preferably a panel of council members, who are interested in going out into the community to educate residents and others and promote safety.

On a broader scale, staying connected to state- and national-level organizations through memberships and mailing lists will provide support and information to enable the council to continue developing effective strategies in your community. This can also be accomplished by volunteering to co-sponsor conferences and submitting proposals to speak at conferences on the council’s initiatives.

Avoiding Some Pitfalls

Are you ready to take the lead in your community to establish a “collaboration team” to improve public safety? Then it is important to be aware of some things that did not work for us.

- ◆ Staying rigidly bound to initial concepts and ideas or “one approach” to meet council goals will stagnate progress, causing people to lose interest. Be open and flexible to change.

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- ◆ Organizing a press conference without a bilingual council member present to speak with all news stations and newspapers was a problem—but only once! Remember the diversity of the community in which you live and serve.
 - ◆ Establishing subcommittees and assuming they will include representatives from different agencies is not advised. We had to restructure some subcommittees to ensure blended representation, which was important to prevent groups from complaining about each other. When the polygraphers met, they complained about the sex offender treatment providers, and vice versa. When we put them together on the same subcommittee, they focused on solutions.
 - ◆ Not addressing covert intentions openly can compromise the integrity of the group. Most representatives will have similar values that are very important to them, but it is important to beware of any covert intentions that might sabotage the efforts of the group. An example is someone in the group speaking with the media and misrepresenting the group's goals, intentions, or activities.
 - ◆ Leaving stakeholders who decide not to participate out of the loop can impede your group's efforts. We were in charge of getting a large group of stakeholders together as representatives on the council, and we were excited about the groundbreaking nature of this collaborative project. After we were under way, however, we were notified by one of the largest agencies and collaborators that, for financial reasons, they were not going to participate. We were deeply disappointed. Would not having this key agency involved weaken the paradigm-shifting collaborative effort? We decided to go ahead and proceed without them, but we kept them in the loop by mailing them our meeting minutes and continuing to invite them to functions. As a result, a few months later, they called us and volunteered to assist with one of the projects we had mentioned in our meeting minutes.

Collaboration is an important part of providing meaningful community supervision for many types of offenders, including adult sex offenders. As we all take initiatives to enhance public safety through collaboration, we can continue to learn from each other by expanding our partnerships and sharing what we have learned from our experiences. ■

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